

Combating child prostitution

WED 9-4-13 LA Times
County seeks tougher laws against 'johns' to reduce demand

By SEEMA MEHTA

Los Angeles County officials Tuesday unanimously called for stricter penalties for men who seek out underage prostitutes, urging state lawmakers to require that "johns" who pay to have sex with children face felony rather than misdemeanor charges, be required to register as sex offenders and pay higher fines.

Currently, "the adults are

essentially given a slap on the wrist by sending them to something called 'john school,'" Board of Supervisors Chairman Mark Ridley-Thomas said after he proposed the resolution. "That's just ridiculous, and it's high time we treat the adults as what they are: predators engaging in behavior that is morally repugnant."

Ridley-Thomas, who sponsored the resolution along with Supervisor Don

Knabe, said three state lawmakers have offered to be co-authors.

The effort comes as county officials are increasingly focused on child-sex trafficking. Pimps prey on young girls, often with ties to the foster-care system, and can make six figures in a year from a small stable of girls, who are sold on the streets or over the Internet. In parts of Los Angeles County, gangs have turned to child prostitution instead of

drugs because they face less scrutiny from law enforcement and can repeatedly make money off the girls, as young as 10, compared with drugs, which they can only sell once, according to officials.

"What we're seeing, much like narcotics back in the late '70s, early '80s, we're seeing the proliferation of sex trafficking being put forth by the gangs," said Long Beach Police Chief Jim [See Trafficking, AA2]

Child-sex 'johns' are targeted

WED 9-4-13 LA Times

[Trafficking, from AA1]
McDonnell.

Previous attempts to fight child-sex trafficking have focused on the girls — treating them as victims rather than criminals — and their pimps. Going after the customers is an attempt to reduce demand.

"If we don't stop demand, nothing changes," said Michelle Guymon, who runs a sex trafficking unit for the county Probation Department.

Jessica Midkiff, 28, is a survivor of child-sex trafficking and said that it was crucial for the public to realize that it is not a victimless crime, and that there needed to be greater consequences for the men who look for underage prostitutes.

"When I was being vic-

timized by traffickers, there was never a shortage of sex buyers ready to purchase me," she testified at the hearing.

"The sex buyers appeared very unconcerned with being caught or any consequences whatsoever. The individuals I saw getting arrested most often were other victims like me."

Los Angeles County Dist. Atty. Jackie Lacey successfully urged the board to

adopt an amendment that the legislation not allow men to claim they did not know a prostitute's age as a defense. She said the proposal represents the current shift in how law enforcement treats underage prostitutes.

"This motion represents a change in our view of who is the true victim of this crime and who are the true criminals," she said.

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Families who foster deserve parity

Tues 9-3-13 LA Times
By Janis Spire

LOS ANGELES County's child welfare system, as noted recently by this newspaper, is facing a critical shortage of foster homes. But a simple policy shift could go a long way toward eliminating this crisis. We need to provide better support for relatives who step up and become foster parents.

Relatives are the backbone of the county's child welfare system. They care for children with the highest needs at a moment's notice, and they provide stability in an otherwise chaotic system. Relatives can help children in county care remain connected to their families and provide them with a sense of community.

Unfortunately, the system as presently constituted fails to adequately support relatives who take in vulnerable young people.

Federal financial support for children placed in foster care is based on antiquated rules that have not been updated since 1996, and the bulk of children in foster care in California don't qualify for this federal support. The state takes care of those foster children who are ineligible, but only if they live with a non-related foster parent. California refuses to pay the same benefits for children placed with relatives.

What that means is that a relative in California caring for a child receives \$351 a month while a non-related foster parent caring for that same child receives at least \$799 a month, and more if the child has special needs.

When home placements aren't possible, group homes are generally the next option, but they are far more expensive. The cost per month for placement in a level 12 group home, the type in which most foster kids are placed, is

\$8,309. That's \$7,958 more than what it would cost to house that same child with a relative.

To put this in perspective, consider Cara Wright, a college student who, since her parents died, is also foster parent to her three siblings. She receives \$681 a month to provide for the family of four. Purchasing bus passes for the family eats up nearly half of that amount, leaving her with little left to cover other basic necessities for her brothers and sister.

Foster children placed with relatives, are still the state and county's responsibility. Most of these children have been removed from their homes because of abuse and neglect and placed into the care of someone who has met certain standards (which are the same for relatives as they are for any other foster parent). It costs as much for a relative to care for a child as it does for a non-related foster parent. And yet, the chil-

dren placed with relatives often receive a fraction of the financial support. Private investment from organizations such as the Conrad N. Hilton and Everychild foundations has helped fill in some of the gaps for foster families, but we need a greater public commitment of funds that would make it possible for more relatives to take in children in need.

California law mandates that relatives should be looked to first when trying to find homes for children in county care. Such placements can lessen the trauma and negative emotions experienced by children who have been removed from their parents. Making it financially feasible for more relatives to step up and provide caring homes for kids in need would mean fewer children living in group homes or with strangers. The system needs to support relatives who are willing to step up to the plate.

JANIS SPIRE is CEO of the Alliance for Children's Rights.

Wednesday, August 28, 2013

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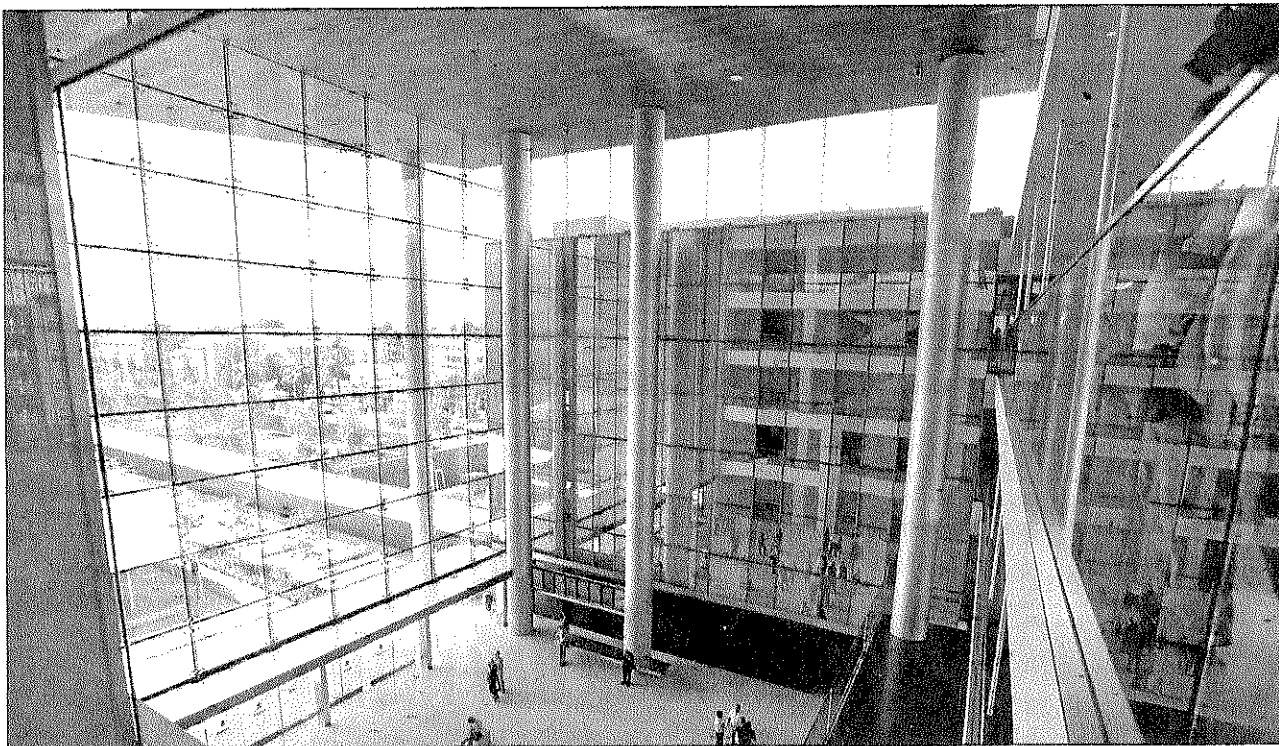
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★
LONG BEACH

A MUCH MORE SUPERIOR COURT



SEAN HILLER — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Long Beach's new Gov. George Deukmejian Courthouse is previewed Tuesday before it opens to the public on Sept. 9. The new courthouse will have 31 courtrooms and improved security features over the existing court facility one block away.

Officials show off expansive glass and iron structure that will replace one of the worst buildings in the state

By Beatriz E. Valenzuela
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Morning lines stretching around the corner from Ocean Boulevard to Magnolia Avenue outside Long Beach Superior Court — described as one of the worst buildings in the state — will be a thing of the past in less than two weeks, when the new Gov. George Deukmejian Courthouse opens nearby.

Members of the media and other officials were given an early glimpse Tuesday of the gleaming and expansive 581,000-square-foot glass and iron building that boasts 31 courtrooms, updated technological features and better security procedures.

"I did make a pet of one of the rats," Assistant Supervising Judge Michael Vicencia joked when asked if he would miss anything about the old building.

He made the comment while standing in one of the

jury selection rooms of the new building, which sits on 6 acres of land at 275 Magnolia Avenue, one block north of the current courthouse. It is set to open to the public on Sept. 9.

"The old courthouse serviced the public for the last 50 years, and we have known we needed a new courthouse since the 1990s," said Vicencia.

The final plans for the new building were approved in late 2010 when the city of Long Beach agreed to a unique land swap, officials said.

The old location, at 820,000 square feet, is much too small to accommodate the 5,000 people who come through the courthouse on a daily basis, Supervising Judge James Otto said during the tour.

The existing location received very low marks from reviewers online, including one man who warned: "Plan to spend at least three hours even if just paying a fine. It's like a Wal-Mart Black Friday everyday. Horribly outdated

COURT » PAGE 4

the water (or go stand up people...)

WED 8-28-13

Court Press

FROM PAGE 1

telegram
and poor ventilation."

When the existing courthouse first opened in 1958, the number of people served by the courthouse was about 344,186 per year. That number has since nearly doubled to 650,000.

While there were efforts to expand the location by adding a wing in the 1970s, court authorities say that hasn't been enough.

In contrast, the entrance of the Gov. George Deukmejian Courthouse is about 20 feet wide with at least four security berths, which officials say will allow for smoother security and weapons checks.

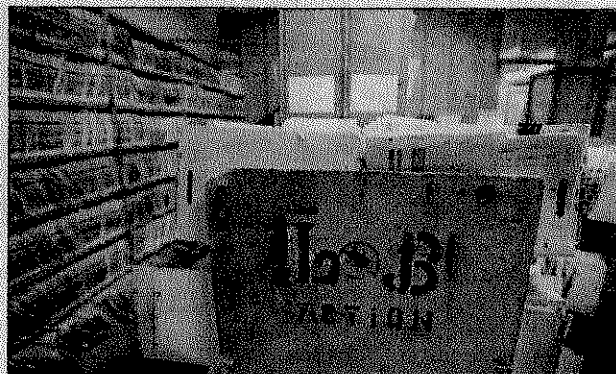
"We waited for what felt like an hour to get in here," said Gabriela Alejandres of Long Beach, who gave a friend a ride to the Ocean Boulevard courthouse Tuesday for a civil case. "I hope the new place will be better than what we went through today."

Along with the lack of space, another problem with the existing courthouse is damage caused by several earthquakes in the 1990s.

The building was retrofit-



Tuesday's tour of the new Gov. George Deukmejian Courthouse and the existing Long Beach Superior Court shows the stark contrast of the buildings. At left, Judges Michael Vicencia, left, and James Otto stand in one of the Deukmejian Courthouse's 31 courtrooms. At right, a storage room is overflowing with case files in the old courthouse.



PHOTOS BY SEAN HILLER — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

ted, but Vicencia said even with all the upgrades, the building could withstand a moderate earthquake but have to be evacuated indefinitely.

In 2005, however, the courthouse received its biggest black eye when a juror suffered a heart attack, and died when firefighters couldn't reach the man quickly, Vicencia said.

The man suffered the attack on the sixth floor. Firefighters arrived two minutes after the first 9-1-1 call went out, but due to the overcrowded and inoperational elevators and escalators that didn't even reach the sixth floor, it took first responders an additional seven min-

utes to reach the man.

The new courthouse will have six public elevators, doubling the number at the current building, as well as escalators and stairs. The courtrooms will be equipped with digital projectors that will allow jurors to more easily see evidence, HDMI cables and a media center where journalists can charge various smart devices and have access to the Internet.

The courthouse was built

as a public-private partnership. The responsibility of designing, building and financing the project was placed on the developer, Long Beach Judicial Partners. In return, the government will repay the developer over the long term.

The California Administrative Office of the Courts entered into a 35-year pact with Long Beach Judicial Partners, a private team consisting of architects,

builders, financiers and facility managers, to build and maintain the courthouse.

Once the project is complete, the state will start making payments based on the success of the building's operation and maintenance. The state owns the land and the building throughout the contract's 35-year term and will continue to retain title at the end of the contract.

State and local officials have lauded the public-pri-

\$442M

Amount in debt financing from seven banks that the project company's leader, Meridiam Infrastructure, took on in 2010 to help finance the courthouse

531,000

Square footage of the courthouse, which will have 31 civil and criminal courtrooms

4,500

Expected number of daily visitors to the courthouse

vate partnership concept as an innovative, cost-effective way to build the courthouse.

Local officials, meanwhile, are eager to leave behind the old building.

"We've been waiting for this for some time and it's been a long time coming," said Vicencia.

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PALMDALE

Tortured boy's family to sue Los Angeles County

By Kelly Goff

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The grandparents of an 8-year-old Palmdale boy who died after being tortured, allegedly by his mother and her boyfriend, have taken the beginning steps toward a lawsuit against Los Angeles County, the Department of Children and Family Services, Palmdale Unified School District and others.

In documents served to potential defendants this week, the grandparents allege county investigators illegally removed Gabriel Fernandez from their care just months before he died and returned him to his mother, 29-year-old Pearl Sinthia Fernandez, over their objections and multiple allegations of abuse.

Gabriel lived with his mother's parents from the age of one month until October 2012, when his mother decided she wanted custody and asked DCFS for help.

"Despite the objections of Robert Fernandez and Sandra Fernandez, and the warnings that Pearl Fernandez had previously abused her other children, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department removed Gabriel Fernandez from his

grandparents' home and placed him with his mother, Pearl Fernandez, and her boyfriend, Isauro Aguirre," the 16-page document states.

Gabriel was found unresponsive May 22 and died at a local hospital two days later. The little boy had BB pellets in his lung and groin, a fractured skull, cigarette burns on his body, and two teeth had been knocked out, allegedly by Aguirre, while his mother did nothing to stop it.

But investigations into Gabriel's death have shown that there were allegations of abuse by Pearl Fernandez long before the little boy died, and four DCFS employees are losing their jobs as a result of a probe into the handling of the case.

County documents released in June indicate there were more than 60 complaints lodged with DCFS about Pearl Fernandez and eight separate investigations started on the family, including one underway when Gabriel died. His two sisters are now in foster care.

In the lawsuit, Gabriel's grandparents allege that one investigator with the Department of Public Social Services who had been called out to look into charges of welfare fraud by Pearl failed to document injuries to the little boy.

"Rather than reporting the suspected abuse, (the investigator) telephoned Gabriel Fernandez's mother, Pearl Fernandez, the following day and asked her out on a date," according to the suit.

The lawsuit also names Palmdale Unified School District, claiming the officials and teachers at Summerwind Elementary School should not have released Gabriel to his mother's care after teachers became aware of repeated abuse, which had been reported.

John Noland, attorney for Robert and Sandra Fernandez, was not immediately available for comment.

Gabriel's mother and Aguirre are being held without bail, awaiting arraignment on charges of capital murder with a special allegation of torture, according to the Los Angeles District Attorney's Office. Both arraignments have been postponed three times. They are next due in court Oct. 7.

Detectives who interviewed the couple after Gabriel went into the hospital say Aguirre admitted to hurting the boy and Pearl Fernandez admitted to being in the room when it happened and doing nothing to stop it.

If convicted, each could face the death penalty.

Exhumations revive ghosts of Florida school

Tues 9-3-13 L A Times

Survivors wait as researchers excavate the grounds on the site of an institute for troubled boys.

By Benjamin Mueller

The men remember a manicured campus stained by the blood of teenage boys. They remember the explosion of the leather strap — 30 lashes, 50 lashes, more than 100 — and the bloody classroom chairs they scrubbed down later.

For more than a century, the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys in the Florida Panhandle town of Marianna took in damaged children and turned out shattered men.

The state closed the school in 2011 after the U.S. Justice Department documented some of the abuse. But the sprawling campus may still be hiding horrors.

On Saturday, researchers began excavating the grounds in search of graves. Records show that 96 boys died at the school between 1914 and 1973. Among them were 20 who died from influenza and pneumonia and eight who burned to death in a locked dormitory.

Just how many bodies are buried there is unclear. A team of researchers from the University of South Florida used ground-penetrating radar last year to detect 50 bodies. But that was 19 more than officially accounted for. The excavations, which continue until Tuesday, promise to rewrite patchy records

and have drawn attention from across the state.

Among those waiting to see what the work reveals are three people with special ties to the school: Jerry Cooper, who watched a classmate die; Erin Kimmerle, who conducts research on society's most vulnerable; and Ovell Krell, who wants Florida, after all these years, to let her bury her brother.

A young witness

At 2 a.m. one night in 1960, a 15-year-old quarterback for the Dozier School for Boys football team was sleeping in Roosevelt Cottage when two men woke him up. They wanted information about a boy who had fled the school, a "runner."

Soon, Jerry Cooper was being dragged in his nightgown to the White House, a small concrete chamber where boys were beaten. A leather strap sliced through the dank air and slashed his back. Later, Cooper would remove pieces of nightgown from his torn, purple skin. A boy in another room counted 135 lashes.

"They thought this would heal some troubled boys," said Cooper, now 68. "But it turned a lot of men into monsters." He still battles anger problems that led to an arrest record nearly 40 assaults long.

In August, Cooper drove 500 miles from his home in Coral Gables to Tallahassee, where he watched Gov. Rick Scott and the state Cabinet vote unanimously to allow researchers to dig on school grounds.

The work may turn up a friend, Edgar Elton, who

stopped breathing feet away from Cooper during a football practice. Elton had asthma and told Cooper that instructors forced him to practice even though a doctor's note prohibited him from playing.

Cooper, who is white, says he knows only half of what happened at the school. White and black students were segregated until 1968, heirs to a history of discrimination in Marianna that some trace to a Civil War victory there by black Union soldiers.

A black student and friend of Cooper, Johnnie Walthour, recalled being asked to dig a grave for a friend who was beaten to death. They made Walthour pull plows "just like a mule," he said.

That kind of abuse wasn't uncommon in parts of northern Florida well into the 1900s, Cooper said. In 1934, residents of Marianna famously lynched a black farmhand, Claude Neal, who was suspected of killing a white woman.

Cooper hopes the exhumation offers victims' families closure. But he's just as eager to unearth a period of racial violence he says too many have ignored.

"It's gonna get nasty."

A civil rights story

Erin Kimmerle reads history in buried bones. A forensic anthropologist at the University of South Florida, she's studied the aftermath of atrocities in Nigeria and Kosovo.

Now the leader of the university's excavation team, Kimmerle is digging for more than forensic evi-



EDMUND D. FOUNTAIN Tampa Bay Times

A GRAVE is exhumed at the site of the school, where records show 96 boys died between 1914 and 1973.

dence; she also wants people to remember how Florida once discarded its boys.

"Cemeteries are a reflection of who we are as a society," she said. And criminal justice in Florida, she said, was conducted as a for-profit operation.

Until 1923, Florida practiced the convict lease system, an arrangement with origins in the Reconstruction-era South that provided largely black prisoner labor to private bosses for a fee. "It's been described as modern-day slavery," Kimmerle said.

The school sold 20,000 bricks a day, all produced by students. In 1921, one superintendent had students cut timber on his private land, then sold the timber to the school for over \$9,000.

Kimmerle said it's easy to forget an era when the state could handle criminals for profit and hide its bodies. "To be buried in unmarked

graves and lost to time and place doesn't register to most of us."

And yet it happened, one chapter in a longer-running drama. "This is a story of civil rights," she said.

A sister's grief

Ovell Krell was 12 years old when her older brother's body was buried somewhere at the reform school in 1941. Officials said Owen Smith had escaped Dozier and died while hiding under a house in Marianna. That story never sat right with his sister.

"I knew it then, I know it now," Krell said. "I don't think a 14-year-old boy is going to crawl under a house and lay there to die."

Owen left home one day in 1940, maybe heading to Nashville to play his guitar, but Krell is only guessing. His parents got word that he had been arrested in Tallahassee, Fla., charged with

stealing a car even though he didn't know how to drive. He was hauled to Dozier after a hearing to which his parents were never invited.

Owen wrote to his parents, once saying he'd been hauled back to campus after trying to escape: "I got what was coming to me."

Then Owen stopped writing. Frantic letters from his mother, Frances Smith, went unanswered. When the superintendent replied that Owen was missing, Smith threatened to pay a visit.

She never saw her son. A day before she arrived, the family was told Owen had been found under a house, his body decomposed. An invitation to retrieve his body was rescinded when police said he'd accidentally been buried already. Krell knew this wasn't how it was supposed to work.

Smith stopped cooking and cleaning, and practically quit raising her children. "She never was my mom hardly at times," Krell said. Krell's own grief hardened quickly, and she took up the task of raising her younger siblings.

Now 84, Krell is sober and reserved, grateful for the excavation work but doubtful her brother will ever be identified. She's a former police officer and a realist.

And then abruptly, in a telephone interview, the cop persona gave way to that of a desperate sister hoping for news. Krell echoed her mom's doubts that Owen was really dead: "We never knew — we don't know till now, even."

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'It's modern-day slavery'

SUN 9-1-13 LA Times
Officials have a change in perspective on young prostitutes

STEVE LOPEZ

"When I turned 14, that was when I hit the track."

The track, as Jessica Midkiff calls it, was Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, where she trolled for johns and turned every cent of her earnings over to the pimp who owned her.

If you tried to skim a dollar here or there, Midkiff said, or if you got arrested and ratted out your pimp, you or someone in your family was likely to be beaten or tortured.

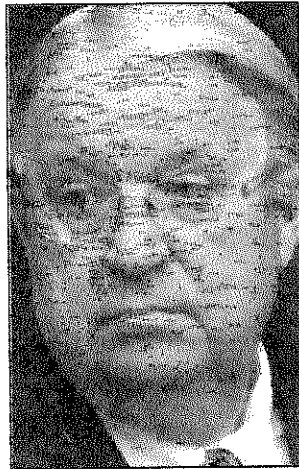
"When a pimp says he's going to torture you, what I've seen is girls in dog cages, girls being water-boarded, stripped down naked and put in the rain and cold outside and having to stand there all night, and if you move, you'll get beaten. I've seen girls get hit by cars and stunned with stun guns.... I've seen girls burned and strangled."

Midkiff lived this life for far too long but managed to make a break at 21. Today, at 28, she's working to help steer other girls out of the trade.

Sex trafficking is big business in Los Angeles County, and underage girls by the hundreds are lured or forced into service. From 2010 to 2012, according to the county Probation Department, 555 juveniles were arrested for prostitution-related offenses. Authorities believe far, far more are never caught.

In an effort to protect underage girls, county Supervisors Mark Ridley-Thomas and Don Knabe will introduce a motion calling for a crackdown on johns, making solicitation of a minor a felony rather than a misdemeanor, raising the fine from \$1,000 to \$10,000, seizing property if necessary to pay the fine and making the names of the johns public.

"This is simply intolerable, and we need to stop calling these girls prosti-



IRFAN KHAN Los Angeles Times



BOB CHAMBERLIN L.A. Times

SUPERVISORS Don Knabe, left, and Mark Ridley-Thomas are working to protect underage girls.

'I always made a judgment about them; I thought it was their choice. I didn't realize the exploitation and coercion involved.'

— MICHELLE GUYMON, who runs a sex trafficking unit for the Los Angeles County Probation Department

tutes and call it what it is: statutory rape," Ridley-Thomas told me Friday. The average age of juveniles entering "this horrible life" is 12, he said.

"That's the repugnant, vile truth," the supervisor wrote in a prepared statement, adding that "children are being forced to have sex with 10 or 12 men a day, every day of the week. Girls are being beaten, drugged, starved and even branded... while all too often the child predators walk away scot-free."

Michelle Guymon, who runs a sex trafficking unit for the Probation Department, told me she underwent a dramatic change in perspective on the girls caught up in this life after getting to know them.

"I always made a judg-

ment about them; I thought it was their choice," she said. "I didn't realize the exploitation and coercion involved."

It was easier to view the 17- and 18-year-old girls as responsible for their own actions, she said. But she discovered they had been involved in the trade for years, having started as runaways from abuse, broken families and foster homes.

"When I came across my first 10- and 11-year-olds, I thought, 'There's no way this was a choice.' You don't wake up one day and say this is what you want to do with your life."

Catherine Pratt, a commissioner in Compton Juvenile Court, said the vast majority of girls who come into her courtroom on prostitution-related offenses are African American and from the county's poorest communities. She started a program two years ago to direct girls into housing and provide counseling and mentoring in hopes of helping them break free of the business.

Pratt has seen some successes, but the challenge is great.

"I would say the majority of the girls are with pimps, and those pimps are affiliated with gangs," said Pratt, who said it's her understanding that the gangs make as much money from selling young girls as they do from selling drugs.

Many of the girls believe that giving police any information about their pimps could get them killed, said Pratt, and that has "a chilling effect" on their willingness to cooperate. Pratt recalled a case last year in which a girl was badly injured, perhaps for talking.

"She was run over, she thinks by her pimp, and had her whole leg shattered," said Pratt. "She has rods in her leg and is still healing, and many of her teeth were knocked out. No one was prosecuted for it."

Jessica Midkiff is now in college while working as a consultant for county probation, where she shares her story with girls who live in the hell she once lived in. When she'd finally had enough, after more than a dozen arrests for prostitution-related offenses, she got help from the Mary Magdalene Project, a Van Nuys nonprofit that helps exploited women start new lives.

There was a lot for Midkiff to work through, and some of the work remains. She said she was abandoned by her father, then abused by her stepfather and by neighborhood men in South Los Angeles before walking the streets at 14.

"The culture is, 'You don't tell,'" she said. "What happens in this house stays in this house or you might get killed."

She had a break with her mother, hung out with "the wrong crowd," then fell in with a string of pimps who either showered her with compliments or paralyzed her with fear — or both. Each one "branded" her, she said, showing me the tattoos on her neck and arm.

"It's modern-day slavery is all it is," she said. "If you want to use the restroom, you have to ask. If you want to eat, you ask, and if you don't get permission, you just don't do it. It's more than physical domination. It's emotional and mental, and that's the domination that tends to linger."

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Tues 9-3-13

Plan calls for going after adult offenders

Daily News

County supervisors
want California to
increase punishments

By Christina Villacorte
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Saying not enough has been done to crack down on people who exploit children forced to become prostitutes, Los Angeles county officials will launch a campaign today to make California the most expensive state in the country in which to be convicted of soliciting sex from a minor.

Supervisors Don Knabe and Mark Ridley-Thomas are set to introduce a motion asking the state legislature to increase penalties for so-called "johns" from \$1,000 to \$10,000.

"Over the last 18 months, we have worked really hard to protect young victims of sexual exploitation," Knabe said. "But to stop this horrific crime, we must address the 'demand' side, and that is why we are asking the state to establish harsh consequences for those who solicit sex with young girls."

"I think that any scumbag who buys a 12-year-old should pay a severe penalty for what amounts to the rape of a child," he added.

"These are children who are being exploited for the enjoyment of unscrupulous men, and it is our duty to protect them," Ridley-Thomas said.

The two want to send letters to the state Senate and Assembly, as well as to Gov. Jerry Brown and Attorney General Kamala Harris, to urge them to amend the state penal code to make paying for sex a felony — rather than a misdemeanor — if the victim is a minor.

They said it should also require

Tues 9-3-13

Sex offense

Daily News

FROM PAGE 3

that "customers" register as sex offenders and that the penalties be used to pay for programs that work to prevent the sexual trafficking of children. If they cannot afford the penalty, their assets should be seized, Knabe and Ridley-Thomas said.

The motion would call on Congress to strengthen federal laws as well.

According to the California Child Welfare Council, kids as young as 10 are being peddled for sex every day in Los Angeles County. Many of them come from troubled families and have previously been under the jurisdiction of the Department of Children and Family Services.

The council said child

sex trafficking has become more profitable than selling drugs, noting that a pimp can receive \$162,500 tax-free annually for each child he forces into prostitution and that the average life expectancy of children who enter the sex trade is seven years. This means, on average, a child forced into prostitution at age 12 will be dead by 19.

By law, children cannot

consent to sex, and adults who exploit them are guilty of statutory rape. However, kids forced into prostitution are often criminalized, while their customers face lighter penalties.

"This is a loophole that must be closed," Knabe and Ridley-Thomas said in their motion. "There should be no 'get out of jail free' card for people who violate children."

Getting tough on sex trade

L.A. County urges legislators to make it a felony to solicit underage girls. But the challenge is getting girls off the streets.

STEVE LOPEZ

On a typical Friday or Saturday night on Long Beach Boulevard in Compton and nearby communities, men by the hundreds go cruising for prostitutes, and they have no trouble finding them.



It used to be that a "john" had to take care not to get caught soliciting action. About 100 officers worked vice in the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. But priorities have shifted dramatically in recent years as prostitution became thought of by many as a victimless crime.

How many officers work vice today?

"Officially, there are five on that detail," said Chief of Detectives Bill McSweeney, although additional officers are called in at times.

It may be time for another shift in resources, because members of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors have suddenly seemed to notice that a lot of women working the street are actually underage girls as young as 10 or 12, often being exploited by gangs that essentially enslave them in the sex trade.

At Tuesday's meeting, the supes called on Sacramento to attack the demand, making it a felony rather than a misdemeanor to solicit an underage girl.

"Children cannot give consent by definition," said Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, who added that "by most standards," sex with a minor is statutory rape. And yet the perpetrators often get little more than a ticket to "john school," where they are warned about the evils of prostitution.

There's really nothing new about underage prostitution. What's different, though, is what Ridley-Thomas and Supervisor Don Knabe have referred to as "a paradigm shift," in which juveniles in the sex trade are more commonly viewed as victims in need of being rescued rather than punished.

It's not clear how many underage girls are at issue here, but it's clearly in the hundreds if not the thousands, based on the number of juveniles arrested for prostitution-related offenses. And my Sunday column on Jessica Midkiff, who also testified at Tuesday's meeting, explained how the business works.

Midkiff, 28, came under

the command of several pimps beginning at the age of 14, and they made the ground rules crystal clear.

Run, and we'll track you down and beat you.

Call the police and rat out your pimp, and we'll torture you or your family.

At the meeting Tuesday, support for tougher legislation came from Los Angeles County Dist. Atty. Jackie Lacey, Long Beach Police Chief Jim McDonnell, Compton Mayor Aja Brown and the Sheriff Department's McSweeney.

No surprise, because who could possibly be opposed to rougher sanctions for anyone who pays for sex with a minor? Not many cops, said McSweeney, but he did point out a few complications.

One reason johns don't get charged with statutory rape, he explained, is that it's not easy to catch them in the act of sex. It's a little easier to catch them soliciting, but even that can be tricky. Johns tend to get arrested in sting operations after they solicit an undercover cop, and the cops who pose aren't underage.

McSweeney said there are times when deputies pick up an underage girl and take her to county social services. Often, he said, that girl will end up in a group home, flee the next day, and be back on the street that night. It's a revolving door, he said, and the system could use some tweaking.

At Tuesday's meeting, the only hint of hesitation

about the proposal by Ridley-Thomas and Knabe came from Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, who supported it, but worried that penalties against johns would become greater than penalties against the pimps.

But before the meeting, I found someone who was far more critical of the proposal.

"I think they're just grandstanding, and I think they're doing it to make themselves look good and they have no idea what the impact will be on the streets," said Lois Lee, who runs Children of the Night, a local nonprofit group dedicated to "rescuing America's children from prostitution." Since 1979, the agency has offered refuge, housing, education and job services for girls from all over the country.

Lee said she thinks existing laws against solicitation are adequate and simply need to be more strictly enforced. Going to "john school" shouldn't expunge your first offense, she said, and a second conviction should result in a mandatory jail sentence.

She said she feared that making solicitation of a minor a felony would drive the trade further underground, creating greater risk for the girls. A more creative and constructive way to help underage prostitutes, in Lee's mind, would be to remove them from the streets for their own safety.

"A child involved in prostitution is a danger to her-

self, so you would hold her in a hospital setting for a 72-hour assessment," Lee said.

An interesting approach, but it didn't fly with Lacey, who predicted a number of legal hurdles.

"The fact is, we do need to be more creative," said Lacey, but she thinks attacking the demand is essential. "If the market didn't exist or dried up, maybe there wouldn't be this desire on the part of gang members to be out there marketing kids," she said.

And as for other approaches, Lacey said her department has one in the works for girls who come into the court system on prostitution-related charges.

"Rather than treating them as criminals, we'd try to get them out of the lifestyle, with a place to live and somebody to work with them," Lacey said.

There's no single answer, Juvenile Court Commissioner Catherine Pratt told me. She likes the gist of Lee's suggestion to swoop in and try to rescue the girls before they are even charged, but she also likes tougher sanctions on johns and pimps.

And then there's the really hard part — addressing the family dysfunction, the socioeconomic collapse, the depravity and desperation that put young girls on the streets, easy prey for degenerates and reprobates.

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DAILY BREEZE

Wednesday, September 4, 2013

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INKED INCENTIVE

Sheriff's Department
is removing inmates'
tattoos free of charge
as a reward for
good behavior



Inmate Jessica Henry has a tattoo removed at the Central Jail in Los Angeles. The Sheriff's Department is giving inmates a chance to erase their tattoos, including gang insignias, free of charge at Twin Towers Jail in downtown LA.

ERASING THE PAST

By Christina Villacorte

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The ink that Lamonte Martin once brandished as a gang banger now marks him for death.

"These are the tattoos that guys look for when I'm out in the community," said the 41-year-old inmate at the Twin Towers Correctional Facility in downtown Los Angeles.

"If (members of a rival gang) see it, they won't even ask any questions," he added, rolling up his sleeves to reveal the symbols emblazoned on his brawny arms. "They'll probably just shoot me."

Martin, however, impressed his jailers at the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department by attending months of educational, vocational and life skills classes, as well as substance abuse treatment and counseling while serving his latest sentence for selling drugs.

As a reward, the department is providing him with free laser treatments to zap away the most offensive of his tattoos.

The service — which would cost several thousand dollars on the outside — is offered only to participants of the LASD's Education-Based Incarceration program, which allows inmates to obtain diplomas, GEDs, vocational certificates for various trades and even college degrees while behind bars.

More than 500 inmates have undergone the procedure over the last year and a half.

"On the surface, we're removing

CLEAN SLATE » PAGE 16

"Removing these tattoos greatly improves their ability to get jobs and also improves their self-esteem."

— Sergeant Ray Harley

Related story: Inmates who participate in academic, vocational courses in prison are more likely to get jobs and avoid going back to prison than those who don't. **NEWS A16**



DAVID CRANE — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Nurse Christine Warner removes a tattoo from inmate Ryan Nickholson as other inmates wait the turn at the Central Jail in L.A. The procedure is extremely painful but makes it easier for released inmates to start over.

W 09-4-13
Clean slate

FROM PAGE 1

ink," said Officer Cynthia Murphy. "But on the inside, the amount of confidence that these individuals are getting from this service — it's empowering."

"Removing these tattoos greatly improves their ability to get jobs and also improves their self-esteem, because now they don't have that image of being a gang member," said Sgt. Ray Harley. "All these things are going to help turn their lives around when they get released."

Inmate Jessica Henry, 32, is a former tattoo artist desperate for a clean slate. "I feel that I'm stereotyped by the way I look," she said, glancing at the vivid pigments that embellish her skin from the back of her knuckles almost to her shoulders.

"I feel that I made a lot of wrong choices in my life," added the single mother, who claimed to have confessed to a crime her then-boyfriend actually committed just to protect him. "(The tattoos) represent my past, and I just want to start over."

Diana Nguyen, 29, of El Monte, had been drunk or high when she had a profanity tattooed on her left hand and a half-naked woman on her left leg. "Things that you do when you're under the influence," she said, sheepishly.

Thanks to the laser treatments, both tattoos have faded and should be completely gone by the time she finishes serving her sentence for selling drugs. "At least with that cuss word off my hand, I can try to go in and get a real job, change my life and not be the person who I used to be," Nguyen said.

Removing a tattoo is even more painful than getting one. A laser produces a short pulse of intense light that passes through the top layers of skin and is absorbed by the tattoo pigment, causing the ink to fade over time.

"If you could imagine a razor that's been heated up, placed at the end of a rubber band and then kind of shot at you — that seems to be the consensus of what it feels like," Murphy said.

Most people need three to eight sessions, each about two months apart, to completely



DAVID CRANE — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The tattoos on inmate Jessica Henry are deep and will take a number of treatments to complete. The medical procedure uses lasers and is excruciatingly painful.

remove a tattoo. Taxpayers are not on the hook for the treatments because the payments come from the LASD's inmate welfare fund. Inmates themselves put money into that fund whenever they make a phone call or buy items from the jail commissary and vending machines.

"This doesn't cost the taxpayers one penny," Harley stressed.

And taxpayers actually benefit from a lower recidivism rate — the number of inmates recommitting offenses upon release.

Sheriff Lee Baca's spokesman, Steve Whitmore, said preliminary studies have shown inmates who take part in the department's Education-Based Incarceration program have a lower rate of re-offending than those in state prison.

Martin, who has spent literally half his life behind bars for

various weapons and drugs crimes, now professes to want to do "something different for the community."

He is currently an inmate mentor in the LASD's Maximizing Education Reaching Individual Transformation (MERIT) program and strives to become a rehab counselor.

"I decided to change my life," Martin said. "And I want to show other gentlemen that they can do it, too."

For nurse Christine Warner, who administers the laser treatments that allow the inmates' transformations, the process is "the most rewarding job I've ever had."

"(The inmates) are very grateful to have it done," she said. "A lot of times, they're moved to tears. We've got big, burly guys coming in here, but they start crying because they're so grateful to have this done — they're getting a fresh start."